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ABSTRACT

On the basis that English as a Second Language (ESL) writers encounter cross-cultural interference when dealing with the five-paragraph essay, a study was conducted to examine the writing of three ESL writers in a basic writing class. The case study of one of the subjects, a woman from Hong Kong, focused on her comments relating to the structure of one of her essays, as well as her readers' responses to that essay. The writer's responses indicated that she had a clear idea of the five-paragraph essay, and that knowledge influenced her decisions as she wrote. The readers comments, however, indicated that while the student's essay satisfied the criteria for the five-paragraph essay, it did not meet the readers' needs in terms of discussing ideas in depth. (HTH)

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THE EFFECTS OF READER AWARENESS ON ESL WRITERS

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THE EFFECTS OF READER AWARENESS ON ESL WRITERS

Philosophers say it's impossible to know all of our assumptions, but that trying to know them is important, for the attempt will help us understand why we do the things we do as well as how to change and improve what we do. In the field of ESL, if we examine our methods of instruction, we can isolate a few of our assumptions about L2 composition and then let those assumptions point us toward research questions.

Most methods of ESL composition instruction involve teaching classical rhetorical patterns—comparison, description, argumentation, etc. In addition to these patterns, we teach the five-paragraph theme: introduction with a thesis statement and three reasons or examples briefly listed, three paragraphs in the body devoted to the three reasons or examples, and a conclusion wherein everything is nicely summarized. We need only look at the more popular ESL composition textbooks as well as at the exit criteria for ESL programs to be convinced that most ESL composition courses emphasize rhetorical patterns and the five-paragraph theme. And I'm sure we believe that we are doing our students a favor when we teach these structures. We feel that our students need structures so that they'll have a place to begin. Without these structures, they would be left to flounder around in the sea of language, with nothing under their feet to provide support. Once they have become more comfortable with the language, once they are more secure and more certain of their abilities, then we can let them go into the deep water to explore the other possibilities offered by writing.

Robert Kaplan brought our attention to essay structure in his studies in which he argued that students coming to the U.S. from other cultures and

attempting to write essays for American readers suffered from cross-cultural interference. That is, the writing styles that they learned in their own countries were the writing styles they used, inappropriately, in English. In his studies, Kaplan characterized various cultural patterns of argument: linear, parallel, circular, digressive, and parenthetical.¹ Kaplan's argument was that we needed to teach these students the structure used most frequently in English—linear structure—in order to help them make their writing comprehensible to native English speakers. They have to write like Americans in order for Americans to understand them. And linear structure is most easily attained in the five-paragraph theme.

Now, what does this tell us about our assumptions? We're assuming: One, that American readers expect linear development in texts and are confused when that kind of development is missing. Two, linear development does not normally appear in texts from other countries or cultures. Three, our students learn this development most easily when given structures within which to place their ideas. Four, making our students become consciously aware of structural patterns will help them produce those patterns. Five, exploring and developing ideas is subservient to making those ideas fit into pre-set patterns.

Yet, when our students' attention is focused on format—just as when the students' attention is focused on the language itself—they lose sight of their ideas, with varying results. Either they write painfully unexciting essays; or they ignore the demands of their developing ideas; or they make changes, for the sake of a reader, that subvert their intentions. We've all read unexciting essays, and we are all familiar with our students' overriding concern with

¹Robert Kaplan, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," Language Learning 16 (1966), pp. 1-20; addendum to "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education" in Readings on English as a Second Language, Croft (Ed.), Winthrop: Cambridge, Mass., pp. 416-18.

errors; their bottles of Wite-out and their large erasers are proof enough of this. The third problem, subverted intentions, becomes obvious only when we discuss our students' papers in conferences with them. One of my students explained to me that he had wanted to write a description of an office mate, but he felt obliged to give his description a moral, so to speak, something to keep an American reader's interest—the description itself wasn't enough, he felt; it needed an introduction and a conclusion that would form a framework in which his description would become an example. In other words, his perception of what American readers need forced him to change his intentions for writing.

My experiences with this student and with others made me curious about reader awareness in ESL writers, and I came up with several questions: How aware are ESL writers of readers? What do these students think our expectations are, as readers? What do they think we want and need in a composition? How do they attempt to meet our expectations and needs, and to what extent are they successful? Do their perceptions of a reader's needs match reality? I decided to design a research project that would begin to answer these questions.

I set up a case study of three ESL writers—three women, from Thailand, Hong Kong, and mainland China. They are all currently enrolled in basic writing courses at a two-year college, courses they are required to take and which precede a school-wide writing assessment test. The three students are registered in different sections of the same course, none of which I teach. The students are all, however, former students of mine. For the study, I asked each of them to write and revise two essays that would be handed in to the teacher as part of the course—in other words, these essays would fulfill assignments given by that teacher. I interviewed each of the students about

the changes she made when revising each essay, as well as about choices regarding topic, organization, vocabulary, etc. Next I gave the revised version of each essay to three readers in order to get their responses. The readers, one from the same two-year college and two from a four-year college, read each essay aloud, commenting on the parts they liked or disliked, on what confused them, on unfulfilled expectations, and on whatever else they noticed in the essay. The teacher from the two-year college taught the same level writing course, though he did not know any of the students. The two other readers taught higher level writing courses; I think of them as "future teachers" or "future readers"—representative of teachers these students may encounter during their undergraduate career.

I would like to focus on one particular student, the woman from Hong Kong, named Tammy. In this paper I will discuss her comments relating to the structure of one of her essays as well as her readers' responses to that essay. Tammy's assignment was to explain why people further their education. She met in a group with other students and a writing center tutor who had come to her class that day. In the group the students generated reasons for furthering one's education—the list is at the top of Tammy's draft, below—and she checked the three reasons that she wanted to discuss in her essay. Then, in about 15 minutes, she wrote the two paragraphs that appear after the list.

T-2 (draft)

"furthering ones education"	
parents expectation	
✓ getting a good job	
✓ getting more knowledge	learn more about the world
✓ enriching one's life	
to complete your goal	
friends and councilor	
family	General ideas of the topic
to go on to a four years college	

Education is very important for every country and every person. Some one says that education can influence the country's future as well as a person's future. I believe this and I further my education with three reasons that are getting a good job, getting more knowledge and enriching my life.

I hope I would get a good better job after my graduation. Nowadays, the society where we live on is a very complete society, the completeion between com countries, companies and people. You have to have good education and good ability othwise you can't get a better job.

Two days later, without having worked on the essay at home during those two days, Tammy returned to class and wrote the next draft in one hour:

T-2

Education is very important for every country and every person. I believe that education will influence a country's future as well as a person's future. People have many different reasons to further their education. My reasons are getting a good job and getting more knowledge.

My main reason to further my education is getting a good job. As a matter of fact, we are living in a competitive society. It is difficult for people to find jobs because of the unemployment. I have to have a good education and a good ability, otherwise I can not get a good job or a better job.

Getting more knowledge and enriching my life also are my goals. I always hope I can gain as much knowledge as I can because the world is so big and there are so many things happen in the world but I don't know. Different people have different life-styles. For example, my parents' life-styles is different from mine since we were born in different time-period. Because of the war, my parents could not further their education. I am lucky to have a chance to further my education so that I can know more about the world and to know more about what are happening around us.

In some countries, especially in America, you will see there are a lot of people furthering their education. Except young generation, there are people of different ages studying in college. Government encourages people to further their education. I think this is good for a country's development and good for people to have better lives.

Looking at Tammy's essay, we can agree that its structure is quite simple: Introductory paragraph, with two reasons for furthering one's education. Paragraph 2, discussing the first reason (getting a job) and paragraph

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3, discussing the second reason (getting more knowledge). The final paragraph, wrapping up the essay by echoing the ideas of the introduction.

Notice that Tammy checked three reasons on her list, but her final version only discusses the first two. She decided to combine the second and third reasons in order to save herself time, showing, I think, a certain level of sophistication in writing. In the interview, I asked her why she hadn't mentioned "enriching one's life" in her first paragraph, and she explained, "I think if I put 'enriching my life' here, I have to write more paragraph, more, I have to write the other one paragraph about enriching my life." She knew what she could do within the allotted time, and she made a wise decision not to attempt too much.

As one might guess, Tammy has a very clear idea of the five-paragraph structure. In reporting some of her teacher's instructions for this writing assignment, Tammy said, "In the introduction you have to explain your ideas about the topic" and "In the introduction use several simple sentences to express the main idea about the essay." Referring to her choice of sentence order in her middle paragraphs, she explained that topic sentences come at the beginning of the paragraph and added, "I have to follow step-by-step." That is, there's a recipe and she has to follow each of its steps. About the conclusion, Tammy said, "The conclusion is the summary, so I should talk about what I had already wrote in the essay, what the main idea I wrote in the essay." Despite her familiarity with the format, however, Tammy is unclear about the distinction between an introduction and a conclusion. I asked her to explain why she had added the idea about a government's encouraging education in her final paragraph—an idea that seemed more new than summary. She explained, "The tutor said the introduction talks about your reasons and the conclusion emphasizes your opinion." I asked her how

those are different, and she answered, "I don't know. So I just put something here and then the other thing here." She knows the format, but it doesn't seem to her to have anything to do with ideas. Evidently, she believes, it's just a question of placing one's ideas correctly by happenstance.

My interview with Tammy made it clear to me that she not only is aware of format, but uses it to help her make decisions about what she writes. I asked her, for example, what would happen if she switched paragraphs two and three in the education essay. No good, she said, because then she'd have to change the sentence in the first paragraph that mentions them; and she didn't want to do that because, for her, getting a job is more important than getting more knowledge, and the reasons are always listed in decreasing order of importance.

At this point in the study, I was quite curious about what readers would think of Tammy's essay. I first had the teacher from the two-year college read her essay and respond to it. Here are a few of his comments:

"She seems a little bit more tied into the intro-body-conclusion format of, state in the introduction whatever you're going to talk about in the body and, and, take your introduction and rewrite it and you've got your conclusion and that sort of thing. I'm not saying it's a bad essay, it, it does what it's supposed to do."

So I asked him what he thought this essay was supposed to do.

"She's supposed to write about education, and if the topic was just education and go from there, or what does education mean to you, she did what she was supposed to do. And did she want to write about this? I don't know. Um, I said a second ago, it, it seems like she, when she was writing, maybe she was asking 'what do I have to do next? Oh, yeah, I have to write about getting more knowledge now.' . . . she might have had a guide of, 'what I

have to do next. OK, I did that, OK, now it's time for the conclusion.' Boom."

This reader picked up immediately that Tammy was following a guide, and he gives the impression that that's not the best way to go about writing an essay. Yet, let me repeat his evaluation: "I'm not saying it's a bad essay; it does what it's supposed to do." In other words, this is a satisfactory essay. It meets the requirements—following the format and sticking to the topic. It satisfies this reader.

Let's move now to the two other readers, Tammy's future readers: One, after the first sentence, said "Ugh! You know, I read this and I think, I don't want to go on. I've read a lot of papers that began that way, and I think, OK, it's just so familiar sounding, it's like a generic student paper. But I'll go on because I have to." The other reader also mentioned this aspect of Tammy's paper. She said, referring to the second paragraph, "Frankly, I am so tired of this paragraph" and explained that as she read it she heard echoes of other paragraphs she'd read before. She explained further: "It's like, OK already! I feel, so what? It feels like fill-in-the-blank, and it's such a dull argument." Both readers, in fact, used cliché and formulaic to describe the paper, and the first one had the following to say about the careful structuring of the essay: "The parallelism is so obvious that it bothers me. I don't appreciate that in student writing. It's not one of the things that I value. I'd rather have a little more chaos and a little more interest."

I want to mention also how the three readers responded to the ideas in Tammy's essay. The first reader found a couple of quibbles as he read—is a country something that can be educated, and does the government indeed encourage education. Otherwise, his comments were about the surface errors and the

student's adherence to structure—his criteria for a satisfactory essay.

The other two readers found much to argue with: Why do people have different life styles? How did the war prevent Tammy's parents from getting an education? How is education important to a country? Both of them said that they felt the writer had set up expectations that she had not fulfilled, and these next comments are representative of their opinions:

From one: "'Government encourages people to further their education.' Oh, jeez! I mean, this is just like one thing after the other. None of it leads anywhere. I feel like this student, like, I have an image of this student with about 50 textbooks in front of her and takes one sentence from here, one sentence from there, one sentence . . . and just throws them into this paper and there are, you know, there are all these enormous general statements. She has strung together a bunch of really vapid, boring sentences with lots of, with promise but no delivery."

From the other: "I don't feel like she had to think to do this paper, that's what it is. I don't feel, it doesn't feel like she had to think. And 'I always hope I can gain as much knowledge as I can'—it's like, it's like if you take a topic like nuclear war or capital punishment or something, it's like, topoi, you know? And she blew it, because she didn't even present well."

So the future readers, the ones Tammy is learning to write for, find this essay excruciatingly boring. It doesn't have any of what they look for when they read—no critical exploration of ideas, no fulfillment of promises made in the introduction or elsewhere, no real discussion of anything. It doesn't meet their needs.² In fact, I'd say this essay meets no true

²See Roger Ponder's discussion of this problem in "The Demands of ESL Composition," Gulf Area TESOL Bi-Annual 1:1 (Fall 1984), pp. 9-12.

reader's needs. Only a teacher, or someone participating in my research project, or someone reading this paper would finish Tammy's essay. And, whereas the teacher acknowledges "successful completion of task", the readers could only register utter dissatisfaction with the text.

Through research in discourse theory, it's becoming clear that writing is an interactive process, one involving both writer and reader in the development of a text. The writer learns from her readers' responses, just as the reader learns from the writers' texts. As composition teachers, we provide the bulk of the interactions that our student writers have. These interactions give our students a sense of audience, help them recognize which of their decisions were successful and which failed—even give them a definition of success and failure in writing.

My study turned into an examination of the effects of such interactions on three students, interactions which I wish I had witnessed. Tammy is no unsophisticated ESL writer floundering in someone else's language—she makes intelligent decisions about what to write, based on her analysis of her reader's needs. The problem is that those reader's needs—the teacher's expectations—are artificially limited because of his assumptions about her writing abilities. Because Tammy's teacher believes she needs structure to help her write a successful essay (otherwise, why would he teach the five-paragraph theme?), he suspends his normal reader reactions and asks for very little from her.

Students do generally know what they are doing. They look at our responses, they consider the assignments we give them, and they make informed decisions about what we as readers want from them. And they give it to us, in spades. In fact, they are probably grateful to us for providing them with such a simple set of criteria—it becomes possible for there to be a

recognizable "right answer" in composition when we focus our attention and our teaching on format. But if we truly want to prepare our students for their future readers, for other teachers as well as the readers they will encounter outside of school, we have to become real readers ourselves. Our job becomes more difficult, but to me the work seems worth it when I consider the possibility of never getting another "Reasons for furthering one's education" paper.